

## TRUSTING OPTIMISM

BY [LAH](#)

### **Summer 1967...**

Napoleon Solo was cold. So cold that it almost negated every other signal of physical discomfort echoing throughout his body. Almost.

Looking around all he saw was snow and ice, and steep descents spiraling down the mountain in what seemed an endless path of insurmountable obstacles. Their final destination might be beyond rational reach, but not beyond persistent hope. Never beyond that.

Wrapping one stout rope tighter around his left upper arm and elbow so to avoid using that hand for more than just guiding, Napoleon grunted hard and tugged forward the makeshift sled carrying the moaning form of the old man. From behind the ski-mounted sling, his partner – Illya Kuryakin – maneuvered the back-end of the sled over the craggy terrain by sliding the ropes through his gloved hands, keeping the glide as steady as he could.

Pausing in his determined tugging on the ropes to take another panting breath, Napoleon glanced at the injured man with concern. “Still with us, Dr. Estlebreine?”

“Yes, Mr. Solo,” came the weak-voiced reply. “But you should leave me. Neither of you will ever make it successfully to the bottom of the Moose’s Tooth this way.”

“We’ll make it,” spoke Napoleon without even the merest hint of doubt.

Illya passed his partner a hard look, but said nothing. He knew better than to try and talk any common sense into Napoleon. Solo’s optimism was inbred, unassailable, as integral a part of him as his cunning mind and reckless bravado. It was something that sometimes frustrated Illya about his partner. Still, he did respect that “never say die” attitude in the American, as perverse as that attitude often seemed in tight situations.

And this was certainly a tight situation, no question. Thrush minions were likely not all that far distant from them on this mountain. The only reason for their current reprieve from close pursuit by the enemy was undoubtedly the roughness of terrain. To boot the incapacitated scientist was probably too injured to make it down the mountain alive even after all this effort. True, the two U.N.C.L.E. agents did have in their possession the technical notes on the man’s avalanche guidance machine, one torn half of the thick log hidden inside the flannel shirt of each partner. Yet leaving Estlebreine himself behind had never been an option to Napoleon’s way of thinking.

The scientist had requested U.N.C.L.E.’s intervention in keeping his device from further exploitation in evil hands. Unmasked and somewhat foolishly he had proven his sincerity by deftly reorienting the experimental setup of his invention so that its first full test had slid the path of an avalanche into Thrush’s own monitoring camp at the foot of this Alaskan mountain. That base camp had been quite thoroughly put out of action, but the personnel in the lab facility on the mountaintop had quickly ascertained Dr. Estlebreine’s treachery. Thus the incensed leader of the Thrush stronghold had the aged scientist beaten within an inch of his life and then tossed out into the snow.

Both U.N.C.L.E. agents were bruised and battered from a bout of fisticuffs with some Thrush guards in the process of “acquiring” the design plans on the avalanche guidance machine. A surface bullet crease along Illya’s jaw matched a similar one along Napoleon’s neck, courtesy of the ensuing firefight when they planted charges to blow up the machine itself. All-in-all, however, it had proven a fairly straightforward and successful mission. Until the agents discovered Estlebreine in the snow, still alive and breathing but definitely in a bad way...

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Two broken legs, a broken arm, cracked ribs that had possibly punctured a lung, a probable concussion: Illya made a quick tally of the scientist’s injuries. And that list didn’t include whatever further internal damage incurred from the beating the man had miraculously survived. Estlebreine insisted that they leave him, that they get away before the remaining Thrushes had a chance to steal the schematics back from them.

“Don’t let them rebuild it!” the man pleaded, one hand grabbing tenaciously at Napoleon’s jacket.

“We won’t,” Solo promised, “and we won’t leave you to die here either.”

Illya’s eyes found those of his partner at the verbalized pledge. He shook his head, indicating wordlessly that part of the promise was likely not one they could keep. Their communicators had been lost in the tussle of the various physical battles. Thus they had no way to call for a medical pickup by helicopter. Both their guns were empty, spare clips lost in their brief tumble down an icy couloir from the concussion of the explosion to which they had been far too close. So there was little they could honestly do to fully protect Estlebreine.

Napoleon, however, mulishly jutted out his chin, refusing to account the task as impossible.

“There are plenty of stout branches around, and we have our belts and the leather straps from our skis. We can splint his broken limbs.”

“And then?” Illya questioned coolly, pressing his partner to see the hopelessness of this course of action, but somehow not expecting him to do so. Oh no, not Napoleon.

“We can use the skis,” Napoleon said optimistically, “and the parachutes in our packs. The silk is strong enough to hold his weight. If we fit the skis through the folded material and then thread our ropes through the edge creases, we can improvise a stretcher sled and take him down the mountain that way.”

“Us and what dog team?” deadpanned Kuryakin.

“Come on, Illya,” persisted Solo. “We can’t just leave him here to die. He risked his life...”

“Napoleon,” interrupted the Russian agent, “it would make much more sense for us to set him up in a cave or other shelter, build a fire, give him whatever covering we can, make our way down the mountain and then send a rescue squad up for him.”

“And they would find him on this mountain exactly how? One cave looks much like another up here.”

“We could leave some type of emergency marking.”

“As a perfect target for Thrush to finish the job on him. That explosion only took out the forward bunker housing the avalanche guidance machine,” Napoleon reminded his partner. “There are plenty of thrushbirds still nesting on this mountain.”

Illya sighed. He knew the other man was right, but he couldn't believe anything positive would come of dragging the injured scientist down the mountain on a poor substitute for a rescue sled.

“We will likely finish the job for Thrush ourselves by dragging him down this peak,” remarked Illya somewhat sourly.

“Then at least he won't die alone,” stubbornly concluded the senior agent.

Illya took a deep calming breath as he struggled to bite back bitter words born of frustration. It was useless to fight Napoleon on this. Besides, as Illya's superior, Solo could simply order things done his way. He wouldn't of course. Illya was familiar enough with his friend's sense of decency to know he would never do that in this particular situation.

“All right, Napoleon, you win. We give it our best shot.”

Solo firmly clapped the other man on the back with his right hand.

“I knew you'd see reason,” he stated with a broad smile.

“It is not reason I am seeing here, Napoleon,” Illya challenged. “Rather it is your unrelenting optimism. Yet as always I find myself powerless to squash it.”

That brought a resounding laugh from his partner.

Napoleon was naturally right hand dominant. Any more than companion usage of his left hand was restricted to the forms of ambidexterity in which all U.N.C.L.E. agents were trained. Nonetheless, as they prepared the sled/stretcher/sling and fitted Dr. Estlebreine with what warm clothing they could spare, Illya observed that his friend seemed rather hesitant to utilize his left hand at all. The blond-haired agent kept quiet on the matter, but he did wonder if Solo was suffering from frostbite on that hand. Nothing could be done about that at the moment however. So the two men commenced their impracticable attempt to pull the broken body of the scientist down the treacherous terrain of the mountain without any mention being made of Napoleon's possible physical hindrance...

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Napoleon stamped his feet to speed up the circulation in his legs. Being more of a height with the injured scientist, he had relinquished his outer lower layer of ski pants to Estlebreine. The underlying layer of denim trousers he still wore was doing little to keep the cold at bay.

Glancing over at Illya, he noted the other agent flapping his arms with bent elbows a few times in succession as his hands still eased along the rope of the makeshift stretcher. Illya's jacket had been zipped onto Estlebreine; thus the smaller man only had his flannel shirt covered by a sleeveless ski vest to provide warmth for his upper body. Napoleon knew his friend too was finding that less-than-optimal coverage insufficient protection against the numbing cold.

Tucked beneath the thin blanket provided by the material of the second parachute, the scientist's hands were wrapped in swaddles of cloth that had once been the undershirts of the two U.N.C.L.E. agents. Both men had realized that, having to pull and guide the rough ropes as

they needed in order to move the stretcher, their padded ski gloves could not be surrendered to the injured man. Napoleon was immensely glad of this fact as the thick glove hid from Illya's assessing eyes the swelling and bruising of his left hand.

Napoleon had kept his damaged wrist thus far from Illya's attention and he intended to continue to do so until they got down the mountain. Yet the pain was intense and he knew his grip was necessarily weak. Having the forethought to use the ploy of wrapping the rope around his left arm and elbow for leverage, he was managing to offset the limitation of that hand. Luckily his right hand had thus far succeeded in taking up the slack for its injured mate.

A high-sided gorge came into view, holding the promise of some temporary respite from the biting wind.

Napoleon pointed in the ravine's direction. "We'll rest there for a few minutes."

Illya nodded and together the two U.N.C.L.E. agents maneuvered the improvised sled into the couloir. They positioned it against the leeward edge of the gully, shielding the stretcher and its occupant from the worst of the blustery cold.

Noticing the stillness and closed eyes of the sling's resident, Illya felt against Estlebreine's throat for a pulse.

"Thready but still present," he assured his partner. "He's passed out cold though."

Napoleon nodded. "Probably better. It will be less painful for him."

Solo gazed past the lower slope of the protective crest and toward their ultimate goal, the bottom of the mountain. "We're more than two-thirds of the way down, Illya."

"Too bad you'll die before you make it down that remaining third," a voice spoke from above them.

Both agents looked up to see the station chief from the Thrush lab facility standing upon the highest point of the promontory, gun in hand and casually aimed in their direction. How he had snuck up like that on them, neither agent had a clue. The sound must have been spiraled away from their ears by the merciless wind.

"Trust an egotistical Thrush to announce his entrance like some kind of potentate," muttered Illya disgustedly.

"It's one of the self-recognition recommendations in their megalomaniac handbook," quipped back Napoleon.

The Thrush smirked. "Like useless banter when cornered is listed as standard procedure in the U.N.C.L.E. field operations manual?"

"Are we cornered?" queried Napoleon with wide-eyed innocence as his peripheral vision registered Illya backing slowly toward a snowy icicle-hung outreach some yards behind his body.

"Like rats on a sinking ship," spat out the Thrush, his gun centering now solely on Solo.

"I take extreme exception to being compared to a filthy rodent," Napoleon played out the verbal confrontation to keep the man's focus on him. "It offends my natural sense of fastidiousness."

"Can't have that, can we?" taunted the Thrush. "A shot right between the eyes should be clean enough to satisfy your incessant need for neatness."

The man aimed his gun at Napoleon's forehead just as Illya aimed his clandestinely claimed icicle-embedded snowball directly at that of the Thrush. Illya's high strike hit home as Napoleon threw himself sideways out of the line of the Thrush's weapon fire. The awkward thrust trapped his throbbing wrist beneath the weight of his own body.

The Thrush's gun shot upward, aim ruined. The man's free hand scrabbled over his bloodied right eye. Disoriented, he wobbled and fell from the ridge, crashing down near Estlebreine's stretcher. The Thrush rose slowly. Estlebreine, again conscious, snaked his one good arm around the man's ankle, bringing him down heavily to his knees.

Napoleon rolled, his right arm forced under his body by the jerky movement. He grabbed the Thrush's abandoned pistol with his only available hand, his damaged and screaming-with-pain left. Squinting his eyes in agony and secretly praying his fingers had enough remaining strength to squeeze the trigger, the belly-flopped Napoleon instinctively shot at the kneeling target.

Illya moved forward and bent over the body of the dead Thrush, the front of whose skull was now no more than a memory. "Bull's-eye."

Grunting, Napoleon sat up. His left wrist burned with pinpoints of sharp hurt as he purposely swapped the firearm to his other hand.

Illya noticed his partner bite his lip with the exchange of gun hand, but made no comment on it.

"We should start down again," Kuryakin recommended. "It will be dark soon and trying to negotiate this terrain in total blackness does not appeal."

"Agreed," spoke Solo a little more breathlessly than might be expected merely from the past few minutes' exertion.

Illya studied his partner closely, but again made no particular comment.

Despite the throbbing in his wrist that was threatening the surety of his stomach, Napoleon smiled brightly at Estlebreine. "Thank you for your help, Doctor."

The old man looked up at Solo and smiled wanly in return.

"I'm the one who is grateful, Mr. Solo," Estlebreine spoke softly between uneasily caught breaths. "You have quite the unquenchable spirit, don't you, young man? Rather a quixotic streak, I would even say."

"That's my partner," agreed Illya more than readily, "always willing to do battle with the nearest windmill."

The scientist shifted his eyes to the other agent.

"I rather think he is so willing, young man, because you have confidence he can win."

Illya shrugged indifferently at Estlebreine's surmise.

Despite the blindingly intense ache in his wrist, Napoleon couldn't help but chuckle at Illya's typical reaction.

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The rest of the trip down the mountain, though slow and far from easy, was at least uneventful. Dr. Estlebreine survived the descent and in fact emergency medical personnel said his chances for a full recovery looked excellent.

A prop plane whisked the two agents to the nearest U.N.C.L.E. facility so the mission could be fully finalized. Once ensconced in the single conference room within the small way station in Anchorage, Solo made his report to Waverly via a closed circuit communications link. The avalanche guidance machine had been destroyed, he and Illya had the plans for the device in hand, and Dr. Estlebreine was on the mend and eager to explain his work to U.N.C.L.E. In short: mission accomplished.

"Good work, gentlemen," Waverly complimented them unfussily. "Now get yourselves taped up as need be in a hospital over there in Alaska, and then be on the next flight to New York."

"Yes sir," both agents responded in tandem.

"Not much for any physician to patch up on us this time," Illya voiced his appreciation of this particular blessing. Then he noticed that his partner had yet to remove one of his gloves.

"Napoleon, frostbite making that," he indicated the covering on his friend's left hand with a jerk of his chin, "difficult to take off?"

Napoleon cradled the gloved hand protectively in his ungloved one.

"Not exactly, but I could use your help with removing it just the same. I think it may need to be cut off."

"Cut off?"

All the little oddities about his partner's physical behavior Illya had noticed during that daunting trip down the Moose's Tooth came back to him. He had sensed something was off.

Without a word Illya retrieved a pair of surgical scissors from the first aid kit on the wall of the conference room and carefully snipped open the padded ski glove along one side seam. Easing the material from his partner's flesh, he took the exposed bruised and thickly swollen hand within both his own.

"Prokl'atyj!<sup>1</sup>" Broad but sensitive fingers felt gingerly around the bones. "I think you have a fracture of the hamate bone in your wrist, Napoleon," he advised the other man knowledgeably, "and that you might have impacted it with all the activity."

"I think you might be right," conceded Napoleon with an unconcealed wince.

"When did this happen?" Illya demanded to be told.

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<sup>1</sup> Damn!

“Caught it under a boulder during our unscheduled somersault down the gully after the explosion.”

“All that time on the mountain...” began Illya. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“It’s hardly a life-threatening injury, Illya, either mine or anyone else’s. So why say something at a point when neither of us could do anything about it?”

“You should have it properly set before we fly home,” Illya insisted. “No sense risking further displacement of the bone just to arrive in New York a few hours sooner.”

Illya’s carefully probing fingers resulted in Napoleon’s handsome features twisting into another grimace of pain, making the prospect of a doctor’s attention something to be enthusiastically welcomed.

“Definitely in agreement there.”

“Napoleon,” Illya ventured curiously, “how did you manage to fire that gun, and fire it accurately, with this bad hand?”

Napoleon grinned what Illya classified as his friend’s Cheshire cat grin.

“Couldn’t let you down, now could I, tovarisch? Not after you so sure-handedly blinded our spying Thrush with that icicle-loaded snowball. Quite a pitching arm you got there, Spike,” Napoleon teased with a ready wink.

Illya found his lips twitching of their own accord into one of his little half-smiles.

Yes, Napoleon Solo was the eternal optimist. And yes, that fact sometimes annoyed the more pragmatically-inclined Illya Kuryakin. Yet that fact also was something on which the Russian counted, something in which he had absolute faith, something that he hoped would never change and something that the American was unequivocally certain never would as long as the two of them stood rock-steady at each other’s back.

—THE END—

